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Issue Brief: Disabilities and Officeholding

Key Words

Disability, impairment, Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, equal access, civil rights.

Description

Politicians with disabilities have been holding office since the founding of the United States. Yet while there is underrepresentation of people with disabilities holding office in the US, those who are disabled and holding office often do not highlight their disabilities, except when working to gain the equal legislative rights and opportunities that able-bodied people have.

Key Points

- There have always been people with disabilities serving in American politics, however their disabilities are frequently covered, both literally and figuratively.
- People with disabilities are underrepresented in American political offices.
- The American with Disabilities Act of 1990 requires that public buildings, including civic buildings, must be constructed to be accessible for those who are less mobile.
- Disabilities are not as limiting today as they once were.
- Some politicians have worked to bring attention to their disability.

Issue Brief

There is little attention drawn to politicians with disabilities, nevertheless there are records of disabled officeholders in several countries^{1,2}. In the United States, politicians have been serving regardless of their disability since the early years of the country. There was a judge who was blind, a senator who had lost one arm in his youth, and a senator who had lost his arm in the Revolutionary War all in the early history of the US³. Since then there have been many more politicians with impairments, mostly war injuries and blindness, yet there is not much exposure to these. Whether it is because war injuries are seen as more glamorous and therefore not so stigmatized, or because they are seen as unnatural and more accepted, those who hold office with some kind of physical or even mental impairment are not often portrayed with their difference highlighted. Politicians like Bob Dole (paralyzed arm), Max Cleland (triple amputee), Daniel Inouye (amputated arm), and George Wallace (paraplegic) have been or were active in politics

¹ "List of physically disabled politicians", Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_physically_disabled_politicians, (accessed October 13, 2009).

² Drummond, Megan, "Politicians With Disabilities", article posted Nov. 8, 2007, Suite101.com, Online Magazine and Writer's Network, http://disabilities.suite101.com/article.cfm/politicians_with_disabilities, (accessed October 15, 2009).

³ "Politicians with Disabilities," Nov. 8, 2007.

for decades⁴, their limitations not so limiting. These politicians made several public appearances during their time in office, physical disabilities in plain sight, and continued to hold office, even with their disabilities known.

However, there have been officeholders with an impairment who sought to mask their disability at the national level. Most famously, Franklin D. Roosevelt was paralyzed as a result of polio and Woodrow Wilson was also paralyzed, his paralysis the result of a stroke. Roosevelt's wheelchair was very rarely pictured and he practiced the appearance of walking for public events⁵. Wilson, who was also dyslexic, suffered a stroke in office and left many political decisions to his wife Edith⁶.

During 1930s America, minorities were rarely accepted, including the disabled minority. Without visual media as active as it is today, Roosevelt was able to pass as being a physically able president. While there is no doubt he did not face mental limitations, society was less likely to accept a physically weaker, "unmasculine" symbol in the White House⁷. In fact he stressed his Navy training, which took place years early, to counter this⁸. When Wilson became paralyzed after suffering a stroke, his wife made many important governmental decisions, leading her to be referred to by some as the first female president of the United States. Wilson's disability was covered the way Roosevelt's paralysis was covered – while Roosevelt may not have been able to continue a political career if everyone realized his true lack of mobility, Wilson's wife more than likely would not have won the presidency if it was she who had ran.

While in some circumstances disabilities are covered to help a politician win a position they might not have won otherwise, there are times when those in office use their disability to draw attention to others with their disadvantage and create legislature that provides both awareness and equal access to all. David Patterson, governor of New York State, is legally blind. Unable to complete the bar exam after law school because of his visual impairment, Patterson actively advocated for changes in bar exam procedures⁹.

The most popular example of equal access for those with disabilities is the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. It is similar to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 in that it makes discrimination illegal, in this case due to a physical or mental impairment¹⁰. Public buildings and transportation must provide access for the less-abled, including

⁴ "Politicians With Physical Disabilities," The Political Graveyard, <http://politicalgraveyard.com/special/disabled.html>, (accessed October 13, 2009).

⁵ Houck, Davis W. and Amos Kiewe. *FDR's Body Politics: The Rhetoric of Disability*, College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2003: 26.

⁶ "Edith Bolling Galt Wilson," Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edith_Bolling_Galt_Wilson (accessed October 15, 2009).

⁷ Houck and Kiewe, *FDR's Body Politics*, 7.

⁸ Houck and Kiewe, *FDR's Body Politics*, 87.

⁹ Smith, Ben, "Spitzer's Mate David Paterson is Mystery Man," article posted February 12, 2006, The New York Observer, <http://www.observer.com/node/38382> (accessed October 15, 2009).

¹⁰ "Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990," Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Americans_with_Disabilities_Act_of_1990 (accessed October 13, 2009).

government buildings and civic centers, buses and trains¹¹. Thus those serving with a disability are now guaranteed to have equal access to their chambers, conventions, and conferences.

This legislation helped move those who are impaired more into the mainstream, as it is now common to see ramps leading into buildings and swings made for children with disabilities on playgrounds across America. Likewise, politicians' disabilities are no longer in the forefront. Whether this is because politicians are hiding their disability or the general public does not take notice of them, they seem to be less of an issue to some than for example, skin color or ethnic background.

Images



Governor George Wallace assisted by aides into wheelchair during the Democratic National Convention.

<http://iconicphotos.wordpress.com/2009/07/24/george-wallace-at-the-dnc/>



President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama greet former US Senator Max Cleland.

<https://www.stetson.edu/secure/apps/wordpress/?m=200906>

¹¹ “Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990,” Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Americans_with_Disabilities_Act_of_1990 (accessed October 13, 2009).



A statue depicting Roosevelt at the Roosevelt Monument in Washington, DC. The cloak covering his wheelchair and legs covers his disability.

<http://z.about.com/d/dc/1/0/Q/W/fala.jpg>



Michela Alito-Pier, city supervisor of San Francisco, cannot reach all rooms in City Hall, where her chambers are located.

<http://www.daylife.com/photo/0eHVeb56nXcM7>

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